

# CONTEMPLATIONS

## CONCERNING THIEVES

### A STUDY IN HERMENEUTICS

To the writers of the New Testament Scriptures the term "thieves" furnished a favourite and convenient symbol, at once expressing and veiling a fundamental truth in regard to human life. In one of the Master's allegories, He relates that a certain man, travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, fell among thieves. Upon another occasion He enjoined men to lay up treasure, not upon earth where thieves break through and steal, but in heaven where they do not. Again, He described the Temple, ever the symbol of the individual human organism, as having become perverted into a den of thieves. Yet again, when, according to national custom, occasion arose for the release of a Jewish prisoner, the choice of the misguided mob is said to have fallen upon a robber, in preference to a benefactor. And lastly, as though to give the point final and unmistakable emphasis, it was between two thieves that the Master Himself is represented as having been crucified.

What idea lay behind this reiterated reference to "thieves"; what ulterior truth, of which human brigands and burglars were employed as the veils or symbols? We will suggest the answer first and its justification afterwards; and, as our analysis will show, the answer undoubtedly is that by "thieves" was intended to be understood those material fetters, the body of flesh and the mental organisation (embracing the rational or "carnal" mind and the emotional nature) which, whatever their genesis, constitution, and function, operate as restraints upon man's spirituality, limiting at all times the full operation of his spiritual consciousness and frequently inhibiting it altogether from aware-

ness of its own existence, its own nature, and its latent, transcendent capacities.

But apart from their own interest, a study of the above collated allusions to "thieves" supplies a vivid example of the extremely subtle method employed by the Evangelists in portraying and teaching truth. It suggests, in sharp contrast with popular assumption to the contrary, that the New Testament Scriptures are no mere unsophisticated records of actual fact, related by simple scribes in simple language, intended to be literally construed, and capable of ready comprehension by the simplest reader. Simplicity, indeed, is often, and intentionally, their undoubted feature, so that the humblest intellect may gather some modicum of truth even from the literal sense; but their simplicity is due to the terseness and comprehensiveness of utterance possible only to the master-craftsman; it is of an order which upon analysis is found to summarise and to unify complexities and to focus in one apt and inevitable phrase an entire range of ideas. Considered merely as works of literature, the Gospels display that supreme art which contains, but conceals, artifice; they manifest that direct mental grasp and "absolute vision" which enable an author to give objective embodiment to spiritual truth, and which, as in the case of the greater Greek poets and Shakespeare, install the writers immeasurably above the ranks of mere descriptive and imitative authors. The composition of the Gospels is the work of men who must have been experts in literature as well as in the spiritualities; who doubtless were supreme artists in consequence of their spiritual illumination, without which, indeed, no great art is possible. They were master-mystics, gifted, as every mystic is, proportionately to his illumination, with poetic instincts and with capacity for imagery and felicitous expression of the highest order; whilst the records themselves gradually reveal less and less a historical narrative, and more and more a series of symbolical pictures imaging forth, under the guise of the biography of an individual, the drama of the soul's career, and providing for all who aimed at the knowledge of the supreme verities a proto-

typal and archetypal chart of man's inner life and destiny. That our Lord, that a historical Jesus, stands behind these literary glyphs; that His presence in the world was their inspiration and cause; that He was the model from whom they were drawn, and the motive power behind their production and eventual publication to the world (for in the first instance, they seem to have been intended solely for the private instructions of students of the true *Gnosis*), is undoubted. But since strong warrants exist for believing that the complete truth about the earth-life, and the passing therefrom, of Jesus, the incarnation or embodiment of the Christ-Power, was a mystery reserved for contemplation in certain secret sanctuaries, and one that was not, and never has been, published *orbi et urbi*, nor even related in any written record, it is less prudent, as well as of far less moment, to insist upon the Gospels being literally and historically true of *Him*, than to realise that they are, or should be suffered to become, symbolically and spiritually true of *our individual selves*.

With varying degrees of openness and secrecy, the great doctrine of man's inner life recorded in the Gospels has been told and taught, both before and since they were written, many times and under many different veils or modes of expression appropriate to the age and to the mentality of those for whom they were intended. Never has humanity, exiled as it is from its proper and native abode, been deprived of suitable signposts pointing the way home. The directions upon the signposts, being written in many tongues, and frequently in terms of esoteric cypher, are not necessarily equally intelligible to the various wayfarers, who, in decoding the instructions, are apt to misconceive the import of even the particular signpost intended for themselves. Biblical interpretation of the popular exoteric order, which proceeds upon the assumption that the synoptic Gospels are historical and biographical records in the ordinary sense and to be construed at their face-value, emerges and can only emerge in a welter of unsatisfying futilities and incredible propositions. The truths portrayed therein are truths of a spiritual order, although expressed

(as in literature it is only possible to express them) in materialistic terms and metaphors. Hence they require spiritual interpretation; a standpoint is requisite from which the superficial wording may be translated into the interior sense the writers aimed at conveying. Mystical exegesis, accordingly, opens up unexplored and invaluable mines of truth. It offers a fresh standard from which the truth of Christian doctrine can be tested when rationalistic standards have failed. It facilitates comparison between Christian doctrine and that of other faiths, and in the light of such comparison all religions are seen to be efforts to express precisely the same truth. And it tends more and more to give sanction to the conclusions of modern philosophic and scientific thought arrived at independently of all religious bias, and often by minds frankly hostile to religion, who none the less have been pursuing the great quest after that truth which is the goal and centre towards which all earnest enquiry converges. And if the Gospels are, as just suggested, not works of history or biography, but mystical treatises written by and for mystics, obviously the mystical standard is the only true one by which to interpret them. We will apply it to the subject of the present essay.

The great fiction of the Good Samaritan enunciates, as well as veils, two cardinal verities: the Fall, and Redemption from that Fall. The former of these two is often overlooked, the reader's attention being apt to be diverted from the initial portion of the allegory to the act of charity forming its climax and conclusion. One readily recognises that act as prefiguring the redemption of the individual soul, and of humanity at large, by the Christ-Power: a task impracticable to any less potent influence—the priests and levites of this world and the official systems they stand for. But the idea of redemption, of buying back, obviously involves the idea of a lapse from an anterior state of greater perfection. And therefore the Master in relating, by a figure, the scheme of redemption, is carefully represented as enunciating, also by a figure, the antecedent lapse. It is this subtle allusion to the Fall, however

we may choose to understand that event—and owing to the Fall it is a fact altogether outside our present consciousness—that we are apt to overlook. "*A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.*"

The journey, or *going down*, from the Hebrew metropolis to a distant provincial town traditionally associated with stubborn resisting powers, is figurative of the descent of humanity, originally and essentially a race of perfect and purely spiritual beings, from a super-physical plane (sometimes spoken of as Eden, at others as the mystical Jerusalem referred to by St Paul as "the mother of us all") into the physical conditions constituting our present world, whereof the strong-walled town of Jericho was taken as a type. From the mystical Jerusalem, or "place of peace," the mother-heart and centre of all things, human souls originated, even as the Hebrew capital "the Jerusalem which now is" (Gal. iv. 25-6) was the source and centre of Jewish national life, worship, and government. As the planets of our system are projections from the central sun, that efflux from Deity which we think of as Creation has resulted in the manifestation of our phenomenal world of matter, space, and time, in the midst of which we now find ourselves, and which for us is as the historic Jericho—"straitly shut up," and well-nigh impregnable to spiritual influence from within or without. "None came in and none went out" (Josh. vi. 1). So blinded and obscured is the spiritual self in virtue of its material environment, so shackled is it by physical and psychical limitations, that man's body of flesh and mental organisation constitute veritable "thieves" that waylay it upon its journey, robbing it of its birthright, stripping it of its native ethereal raiment, and leaving it here gagged, muffled and half-dead until such time as it is liberated by the Good Samaritan, the Christ-Power pervading the universe. "Man is a beleaguered city, and his life here passes in trying to raise the siege."<sup>1</sup>

Creation, God's putting of Himself into manifestation,

<sup>1</sup> *Steps to the Crown*, by A. E. Waite.

is a process involving what, for want of better terms, is often spoken of in the West as the descent of spirit into matter, and in the East by the noumenal or formless (*a-rupa*) taking on form (*rupa*) and becoming phenomenal. Spirit and matter are not essentially dual and antithetical. There is a standpoint, though it is one of the spiritual rather than the intellectual consciousness, from which this "pair of opposites" can be seen to blend into unity. But, as a hypothesis for the intellect, we may conceive of spirit, upon reaching a certain distance from its centre, as externalising itself and assuming a material guise or *mode*, just as steam issuing invisibly from a boiler may become visible vapour, thence condense into water and eventually solidify into ice. To our present limited sense-faculties, and to us only, to the exclusion of higher orders of beings inhabiting planes nearer the centre than we, Spirit displays its own most outward aspect. The phenomenal world is the periphery of Spirit: its objectivity is due only to the fact of its being cognised by our senses which, in turn, are at the periphery of *our* spirits. Now when the creative efflux has reached its furthest limit of projection, as it has in the physical world, it commences to return upon its own centre, just as the ice before mentioned might be re-converted from its solid condition into invisible steam. Of this fact Jacob's ladder is a parable; and the same principle operates in the circular ripples in a pond, caused by a falling stone or rising fish, which, when the force impelling them outward reaches its term, retrace their course and move inwards upon their centre; the outward and inward movements being repeated until equilibrium is restored. This inverse or backward movement of the phenomenal world into God is, materially considered, Evolution—the gradual liberation and generation of higher forms from lower and the establishment of order out of chaos; spiritually considered, it is Redemption—the necessary complement of Creation. The two processes, or rather the two parts of the one process, are co-existent and co-active. They are in perpetual operation. They manifest physically in the ever radio-active atoms of

all matter, psychically in the life-force in every organism, and spiritually in the souls of men, and throughout the visible and invisible planes of being until the end, when all things will be indrawn into the Sacred Heart. Hereof Hindu religion, perceiving the symbolism of the alternations of day and night in the temporal world, enunciates the doctrine of the Day and the Night of Brahm; the Day being the æonian period of God in manifestation, the Night, of God withdrawn with all His works into His own inward silence and ineffable splendour. The expanding and closing leaves of the floating lotus bore the same witness of old to Egypt and the East; the parable is daily uttered for us in the West as the daisy, simplest and most familiar flower that blooms, bares its golden bosom to the dawn and shelters its inmost secrets at night with its own infolded petals.

The tradition of our extrusion or Fall (howsoever occasioned) from the more immediate precincts of Deity is so catholic a one that it must have been a canon of the prot-evangel which lies at the back of all the great religious systems of history. Antiquity and universality constitute, of course, inadequate evidence of its truth for modern rationalism, but testimony to it can be adduced from another quarter. In the voluble sacramentalism of Nature, a fact so cosmic and fundamental as the Fall must, if true, surely have perpetuated and enregistered itself in such wise as to be readily legible by the seeing eye and understanding mind. Now evolution, the perpetual tendency of things upwards, has come to be universally accepted as a cosmic process. But does not the capacity for rising imply an antecedent falling? The logical value of the evolutionary hypothesis, as of every hypothesis, can only be appraised by contrasting it with its antithesis; and the laws of human logic are shadows of those of the Logos, the Divine Logician. The truth, then, of the Fall has been perpetuated in our phenomenal world by the fact that *to fall is the property of everything material*. Purified spirit alone is capable of ascension, of counteracting the law of gravitation, which, like the flaming sword of the Cherubim guarding Eden, rigidly excludes from



ascending all that is unfit to inhabit a world more advanced than a physical one. The initial act in the earthly existence of every seed, and germ, and egg, of every newborn animal and child, is to fall to the ground. At the very outset of its career it rehearses in its own form or person the primal Fall of Cosmic Spirit into the plane of Nature; its subsequent function being to rise and grow physically or morally according to its kind. In the dumb motions and affinities of chemical substances, in aspiring plant and soaring bird, in all morphological development and moral progress, in every desire for social betterment, in the perpetual yearning of all souls and all spirits for more light and larger consciousness, uttered or unspoken the continual cry goes up from fallen but evolving Nature—*I will arise and go to my Father*; for the great parable of the Prodigal Son has its cosmic, no less than its personal, significance.

So far as it affects humanity, the doctrine of the Fall, portrayed in the biblical legend of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden, was taught to Greek students of the mysteries in the myth of Psyche and Eros. The fair maiden Psyche, the prenatal human soul, dwelt unconscious of her own perfection and beatitude, in a paradise over which at night shone a star that she knew was the emblem of her divine Lover and the token of His presence, but which she observed nightly to be westerling away from her until at length it vanished from her ken. She had been warned ever to be true to her star, and above all things to repel the advances of Eros (in the Latin form Cupid, *cupido*, her own desire-nature), who, like Eve's serpent, might come to woo her from her allegiance; the inevitable penalty of her fault being the loss of her present bliss and her transportation to a troublous sphere of life, to return from which would be extremely difficult (*cf.* 2 Esdras vii. 11-13). When Eros approached, she resisted for a time, and then came the subtle temptation to which she fell. Eros spoke of her vanished star; it had departed, he said, because her divine Lover, whose symbol it was, had Himself descended into an inferior

world where He had manifested in the form of a star-shaped flower. Upon Psyche wishing she might see the flower, Eros struck the ground with his staff, when up sprang a narcissus, which, in her joy, she forthwith picked and pressed to her lips. At that moment she swooned away. Upon awaking she was no longer in Paradise, but an inhabitant of this earth of ours. Like her synonym Eve, she had tasted of the forbidden fruit and had fallen from the enfranchisement of heaven into the bondage of life upon the material plane.

The point to be noted in the Greek, as in the Mosaic, myth, is not merely the fact of the Fall, but the reason for it. Psyche's action was, if you will, a moral lapse; a "shameful fall," as our old biblical annotators grimly call it; but it was a lapse in a good, a forgivable, cause. She fell indeed, but was not the fall induced by a desire for a closer intimacy with God? Her conduct answered a warmly disputed modern definition of sin; it was "a blundering quest after God," and as with another Psyche, the fallen Mary of the Christian evangel, much was to be forgiven in that she had loved much. We fail, I think, rightly or adequately to apprehend the divine scheme unless we realise that the Fall was an incident thereof that was ordained by, and that existed primally in the prescience of, Deity; that the descent of spirit and its incarnation in the material world was a process as gradual as has been, and is, the rise, the emergence, of spiritual life from within its present physical limitations; and that its incarceration therein, involving, as it did and does, the struggle for emancipation and the knowledge of evil, were, and are, essentially and inevitably necessary to enable the spirit of man to become self-conscious of its own inherent perfection and divinity, by undergoing an experience which is the antithesis of its own birthright in a plane of existence which is the antipodes of its natural home. "Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty (*i.e.* all perfection is latent within us and merely awaits development). Thou hast been in Eden, the garden of God. Thou wast perfect in thy

ways from the day thou wast created, till iniquity (*i.e.* instability) was found in thee." (Ezek. xxviii. 12-15.)

The quaint verse of Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist (and all students of Plato will recall the frequent and gorgeous passages wherein that great seer has enunciated these truths), speaks of the human spirit as—

A spark or ray of the Divinity,  
Clouded in earthy fogs, y-clad in clay;  
A precious drop, sunk from Æternity,  
Spilt on the ground, or rather slunk away;  
For then we fell, when we 'gan first to assay  
By stealth of our own selves something to be seen;  
Uncentring ourselves from our great stay,  
Which fondly we new liberty did ween,  
And from that prank right jolly wights ourselves did deem.

But there is a more moving utterance upon the subject in some lines of Mr A. E. Waite's, in which the philosophy of the matter is expressed with great beauty of phrase and intense devotional fervour, which he will perhaps allow me the privilege of quoting in full:—

I came into the world for love of Thee,  
I left Thee at Thy bidding,  
I put off my white robes and shining crown,  
And came into the world for love of Thee.

I have lived in the grey light for love of Thee,  
In mean and darkened houses;  
The scarlet fruits of knowledge and of sin  
Have stained me with their juice for love of Thee.

I could not choose but sin for love of Thee,  
From Thee so sadly parted.  
I could not choose but put away my sin  
And purge and scourge those stains for love of Thee.

My soul is sick with life for love of Thee,  
Nothing can ease or fill me;  
Restore me, past the frozen baths of death,  
My crown and robes, desired for love of Thee;

And take me to Thyself for love of Thee;  
My loss or gain counts little;  
But Thou must need me, since I need Thee so,  
Crying through day and night for love of Thee!

Now to revert to our "thieves." Psyche, the divine human spirit, has "fallen" from its pristine home into the plane of Nature, where it lingers, stripped of its native raiment (or radiance), wounded and half-dead, in captivity to physical law and material limitations, amid which, none the less, it is its business to fight for its own life that it may emerge stronger and wiser for the struggle and realise its own perfection by having experienced imperfection. The two "thieves" that beset it are the mortal body which incumbers it physically, and the desire-body (called also the astral nature, and the "lusts of the flesh"), which entangles it psychically. The physical body is a thief that chains the soul to the physical world; a strait-jacket, at once clothing and inhibiting the functions of that which it encloses. "Poor phantom of earth and water," as William Blake called it, it is an integument, like all physical matter, innocent enough in itself; a "coat of skin" or badge which will never disgrace the wearer so long as the wearer never disgraces *it*; a body of humiliation as compared with the primal Edenic garment, yet capable of conversion into a temple of the Most High, and one the potentialities of which are not yet even realised by humanity at large. It becomes an instrument of offence only when incited by our other great "thief," our Eros, the desire-nature or organised "mind-stuff," a real enough substance, though one of a metaphysical order, and one symbolised in many religions, as it is in the Bible, by the form of a serpent. This latter, embracing as it does the reasoning faculty and the lower or objective mind, is appointed to serve as a light in the natural world, but, the gift notwithstanding, it forms a cloud of darkness as regards light from the spiritual element that is both within and without us, and indeed, may obscure all spiritual vision. Not until a man has learned to relegate this lesser light to its appropriate use in the natural world, and to "deny himself" in regard to it, can he, walking in darkness, hope to see the great luminary, which, invisible to physical sense, but present in the central depths of his nature, lightens every man coming into

the world, and which, to those who having clean hands and pure hearts, are fitted to evoke it, manifests at first in mental illumination and expanded consciousness, and ultimately may reveal itself to objective vision, like the very glory of the Lord (which, indeed, it is) in

Light, rare, untellable, lighting the very light,  
Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages.

Those who elect to be led by the lesser light alone instead of by the larger spiritual faculty, in other words, those who release unto themselves Barabbas instead of Christ, receive only such light as that "robber" can give; though, be it observed, even that light is God-given, for the name Bar-Abbas means the "gift" or "son of the Father." Like the physical body, though in itself "very good" in its own order, its danger lies in its perverted and misguided use. Unless controlled by the greater light, it wars continually against the enthralled spirit and the things thereof; the psychical or mental nature becomes to the spirit a continual cross, in token whereof, and in correspondence with which fact, the body of flesh, moulded (as upon scientific grounds it is known to be) by the inner psychical action, has assumed the form of a cross, which is its shape when one stands or lies with outstretched arms. Hence, whether we be conscious of it or not, the divine spirit within humanity may truly be said to be crucified upon a cross of matter, a cross of less noble substance than itself. Every human being is a living crucifix. Within each one of us a ray of God hangs crucified.

Now becomes apparent the profound and marvellous symbolism of the crucifixion episode recorded in the Gospels. The spectacle of Jesus nailed to the cross of wood between two thieves typifies the divine Substance crucified within each of ourselves, in the midst of those two thieves, our physical and psychical bondmasters.

The thieves, be it also noted, are twain, because the duality of the substantial and insubstantial, of fixed and volatile, is a universal characteristic of both the

natural and the spiritual order; the same dual nature of even God Himself being exhibited under the symbols of bread and wine, *i.e.* body and spirit. One thief, it is related, died railing and impenitent, making no sign of aspiration for release or redemption; thus does man's undisciplined body of flesh, content with its own lot, than which it knows nothing higher, and ignorant of its own potentialities; that therefore needs must perish and that is impotent to ascend beyond its appropriate sphere, the material world. The other thief, who recognised the justice of his fate and asked to be remembered in the hour of the spiritual nature's triumph, received assurance of translation to a plane of life transcending this world; type of the potential redemption of the purified psychical vehicle of the spiritual Ego, and promise of its ultimate incorporation into heavenly spheres.

The scriptural record of the crucifixion affords us one of the profoundest mysteries open to contemplation. Of its manifold significances the simplest but perhaps the least important interpretation is that literal and superficial one ascribed to it for centuries in the outward Church, and still popularly accepted as apparently the only one. But, allowing to this view its own value, the student of the mysteries, aware that the Gospels, like Ezekiel's roll, are written "within and without," will discern that the purpose of the narrative was less to recount the temporal event of the death-agony of a murdered Master, than to express under a veil of metaphor something of the lifelong cross and the indescribable passion voluntarily assumed and endured by that Divinity who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, exchanging illimitable glory and freedom for the squalid exile and imprisonment in which human life is passed. He will discern in it, also, a parable perennially true of the constitution of every human organism, as has been above suggested, and of the crucifixion therein of a filament of Deity. And, further, he will recognise it as foreshadowing an analogous experience, which, as the climax and fulfilment of the countless lesser crosses and tribulations

incident to life in the physical world, must, with agony like in kind, if not in degree, to that suffered by the prototypal Christ, with similar self-renouncement, and a kindred sense of failure on the part of the natural man, be endured, appropriated and experienced in personal consciousness, as the one supreme *crisis* and transition in the soul's career, as, once and for ever, it crosses that equator which divides sensual existence from spiritual life, the fallen son of man from the regenerated child of God.

And going yet a stage further, and transposing one's thought from a significance personal to man to one of a macrocosmic order, the crucifixion-narrative is seen to be the parable of something infinitely larger still. It testifies, not merely to the temporary immolation of our Lord in conditions of time and space, but to the perpetual immolation of God Himself within His own Universe; it is an allegory of "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," the emblem of Spirit-Substance, of Divine Body and Blood, voluntarily crucified in manifested, physical Nature. For, wherever matter exists, God *subsists* as its imprisoned essence. "Raise the rock and thou shalt find Me; cleave the wood and I am there." Whilst, as for ourselves, complex individuations of matter and mind, beings in whom gross matter and less elementated, astral fluid-substance are organised and "gathered together in His name" (*i.e.* in virtue of His ordinance) He is "in the midst" of each of us,<sup>1</sup> impaled between "thieves" at the centre of our natures, but energising there for the redemption of those "thieves" that, in the consummation, they, too, may "be with Him in Paradise" (*cf.* Ps. xlv. 5; Deut. xxiii. 14).

Since God *is* thus crucified, man, to realise God, must suffer himself to *become* crucified. The two poles, God and man, must be equilibrated *in consciousness*. Jesus, the reconciler between them, by the crucifixion He

<sup>1</sup> The golden yolk of an egg (gold being ever the sign of spirit), imprisoned within the fluid white and the material shell, was a favourite symbol of this truth in the Egyptian Mysteries, which used to teach the aphorism "All truth is in the Egg."

endured, impersonated the truth of the perpetual crucifixion of God, and demonstrated to man the imperative-ness of undergoing a like self-immolation to bring himself upon a parity with God and fashion himself into God's image. Wherefore the cross, the emblem of balanced opposites, is the chiefest of all symbols.

One last word. The Evangelists emphasised the catholicity of this supreme truth by recording that the superscription upon the cross was written in Hebrew, in Greek, and in Latin, the three languages of civilisation then current in the Western world, for members of which they were writing. Thereby men of various faiths were intended to learn, as we may do to-day, that crucifixion, whatever form it may assume, is for all men and nations alike a basic spiritual truth of existence and an inevitable episode in the soul's life; a truth that, by whatever symbolism expressed, is, and must be, a fundamental doctrine of every valid religious and philosophic system, since it represents a principle inherent in the Cosmos itself, and is one, therefore, that must be consciously shared by each of ourselves, individuated members of that Cosmos, which, in its essence, is part of God Himself.

Of this appropriation in personal consciousness of the truth of crucifixion I shall say more in the succeeding essay.